

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Ian Britton

Not I's: Not I, but the Lord/but the grace of God

Introduction

The "Me" Generation, is a phrase that is used in the United States to refer to the Baby boomers (the generation to which I belong!) and it denotes the self-obsession of that era. Today we start a new series of talks on a subject that is, more or less, the polar opposite - the topic of "Not I".

Background

Before we look in detail at the two scriptures that are our topic for today, I would like to take a few minutes to set out the background.

The starting point is the relationship between man as the creature, and God as his Creator. God is omniscient, that is, He knows everything. There is nothing physical or philosophical, that ever has been, is or will be, that God does not know everything about. I am nothing of the kind! There are vast numbers of topics about which I am utterly ignorant. I can only speculate about the future:

- God knows the future with the same absolute certainty that He knows the past;
- God is omnipotent, that is, He has all power. There is no task that is so difficult, or so huge, that it is beyond His power. Anything that power and might can accomplish, is within the range of God. Even the presidents of world superpowers have puny strength in comparison with God;
- God is omnipresent, that is, He is everywhere at the same time. This isn't the same as just being able to see everything, as if God had a super-strength surveillance system; and
- God actually **is** everywhere at one and the same time.

The regularity with which I use the phrase "I can't be in two places at once", underlines how far away from this capability I am!

All of this should automatically stop us focusing on "I" and make us look to God instead, but that is not the story of human history. Adam wasn't content with the position God had given him, and **he** wanted to be the one to set the rules and take the place of authority. That led to what we refer to as "the fall" (See Genesis 2:17-3:7). This was when sin entered our world. Since that point, all men have been born, and have lived, as sinners (see Psalm 51:5). Now the "I" that was not omniscient, omnipotent or omnipresent is not just inferior to God, "I" am a sinner who is totally incapable of pleasing God. My sins taint everything that I do, and I can produce nothing, and become nothing (in my own power), that can please Him in any way. "I" desperately need saving, but there is nothing at all I can do to save myself.

- **I am guilty** - I have done wrong things and there is no excuse.
- **I am responsible** - I did those wrong things of my own free will. Nobody else made me do them, least of all God. I am responsible to God as my Creator and Judge, and I can't pass the buck to anybody else.
- **I am powerless** - I have no strength to change, no matter how much I might wish to do so.
- **I am therefore completely dependent** - If anything is ever to be done to help me, it will have to come from somebody other than myself.

For these reasons, we who are saved, had no part at all in producing our own salvation. God sent His Son (see John 3:16). Christ died and rose again (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). God, through Christ, makes salvation possible and He offers it to us the only way we can receive it - as a free gift! (see Romans 5:15-18)

We will see in this series of talks that, even after our salvation:

- **I have no power by myself** - God gives us His own power, as we shall see in a moment.
- **I am still dependent** - that is, I need God just as much to live for Him, as I did for my salvation.

- **It is the Holy Spirit, living in me, who gives me the power I need** - The Spirit is how God's power is given to us.
- **The power required to live, serve, and wait for Christ, comes from Him** - God gives us the power to do what He commands, otherwise His commands would just mock our inability to answer to them.

Not I but the Lord

Let's look at our first text for today, which is part of a series of instructions about marriage and married life. It come from 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. *"Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: a wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife."*

Paul has been writing with authority on the topic, but he wants to make plain where his authority comes from. Paul is an Apostle, with many years of experience as a minister of Christ, and can point to a life of service that is in harmony with what he teaches. But even such a man cannot issue commands. Only the Lord is entitled to command.

This section deals with the very difficult, and contentious topic of divorce, which it is not my intention to speak about today. The point in question this morning is, who has the authority to determine what is, and is not permitted, in this, or any other matter? We can never dictate doctrine, whoever we may be. No group of elders, no pastor, no synod or committee, is entitled to issues commands. If Paul the Apostle had to say the commands were not his, but the Lord's, then nobody today can make those kinds of authoritative statements. We can, and should, command that the teachings of the Bible are accepted and followed, but we cannot make, or change those teachings. God's commands don't change with time or culture, and guilty, responsible, powerless and dependent creatures are not authorised to vary them (see Deuteronomy 4:2, Proverbs 30:5-6 and Revelation 22:18-19). Anybody claiming apostolic authority, infallibility, or any other kind of absolute authority is stepping beyond what Paul claimed for himself, and encroaching on the authority reserved for God. Even the church collectively, has no ultimate authority, it can only instruct and insist upon what God commands.

Not I, but the grace of God

Now we come to our second text from 1 Corinthians 15:10: *"But by the grace of God I am what I am and His grace toward me was not in vain, but I laboured more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."* 1 Corinthians 15:10 is part of a long chapter in which Paul sets out the vital importance of the resurrection. He starts by reminding them of the gospel which he (Paul) has preached, and which they (the Corinthians) have believed (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). That gospel is based on the death, burial and resurrection of Christ for our sins, as prophesied by the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4), and evidenced by the apostles and more than five hundred others (1 Corinthians 15:5-7). Paul states that he too was an eye witness of the fact that Christ was raised, having seen Him at his conversion, on the road to Damascus (1 Corinthians 15:8). Despite Paul's declared unworthiness of the office of an apostle, he worked more than any of the others. But Paul will not take credit for these labours, and ascribes them to the grace of God - *"Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."*

John Newton, the converted slave trader, made the following statement about himself, doubtless inspired by this verse. "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still, I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

Like Paul, Newton was far from proud of what he once was, and not satisfied with what he currently was, but he was ready to give God all the credit for the transformation made so far, and for the final transformation to be made in heaven.

Paul claims no credit for what he now is, or how he became that. It is, he declares, by the grace of God that I am what I am. Nor does he claim any credit for his labours, even though he definitely did the labouring! You might say that he out-achieved all the other apostles in terms of what he accomplished, but Paul maintains that it was, *"Not I, but the grace of God which was with me"* (1 Corinthians 15:10)

All of this raises a series of questions in my mind that I will try and answer for you.

How do we reconcile Paul's working hard with his giving all the credit to the grace of God?

On the face of it, this is a plain contradiction - either Paul laboured or he didn't. The facts recorded in the book of Acts, and Paul's own accounts of his work in passages such as 2 Corinthians 11, appear to suggest that Paul laboured very hard indeed! So how can Paul say that this was "Not I" working? The answer is found in the strength that was sustaining the work. Paul disclaims any strength, or ability to do these works himself, hence he cannot claim them for his own. It was the grace of God working through Paul that energised these activities. God gave Paul the grace to

travel, preach, teach, encourage and suffer, hence, the credit belongs to the grace of God. This isn't hair splitting, or false modesty from the Apostle. He was fully convinced that he could no more claim credit for his labours in the gospel, than he could for his conversion and salvation. Paul had to be a willing instrument for God to use in the gospel. He actually made the journeys and preached the sermons. But if they had simply been Paul's efforts, they would not have had the world changing impact that they did. God willed and planned the labours, He directed Paul to make them, and He provided Paul with the strength, all through His own grace. Thus, Paul rightly disclaims any credit for them.

Which all begs the question, "What about my works for the Lord? Can I truly claim that God is at the root of all of them, and that they are all carried out solely by the grace of God?"

What if I try and pass off my own efforts as the works of God?

We are still imperfect creatures, and we regularly deceive ourselves about our motives and actions. In fact, we probably deceive ourselves much more often than we deceive other people, and we certainly never deceive God! (see Galatians 6:7) There are times when I do the things I desire, rather than what the Lord requests. It is also possible for me to do the things He asks, but to do them using my own energy and strength. Is this still the Lord's work? The simple answer is no; it is my own doing. It is "I" at work and we have already seen what that "I" is like! For those of us who are strong willed, or who naturally have lots of energy and enthusiasm, this presents a real danger. There is a natural tendency, when the Lord has given us something to do, to roll up our sleeves and say, "Right, I am going to get straight on with this." So doing, we fail from the start to seek the Lord's direction at every stage, and to ask for His strength. At other times we begin well, but, through growing self-confidence, or because we have slowly drifted away from following the Lord closely, we gradually, imperceptibly slip into substituting our own strength for His.

Am I ever allowed to feel proud of my Christian work?

The answer to that depends on what I mean by the word proud! A quick check of the dictionary produces two distinct definitions. The first is, "Having or showing an excessively high opinion of oneself or one's importance." That's bad! The Bible has plenty to say about that kind of pride, and it is never acceptable.

This is the kind of pride meant by the often misquoted verse Proverbs 16:18, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" It is why several verses tell us that "*God resists the proud*" (see James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5).

But the dictionary has a second definition, "Feeling deep pleasure or satisfaction as a result of one's achievements or those of someone with whom one is closely associated". That is closer to the warm glow of satisfaction some of us may feel at seeing our children do what is right, rather than boasting to other people about their exam results! The kind of pride that is a warm pleasure in something well done, while all the time acknowledging that the thing was done with a power other than my own, seems right and proper. It is reasonable to feel some pleasure and thankfulness when a sermon has been clearly delivered, or a responsibility faithfully completed. It only becomes a problem when I start to preen myself on how well I performed, or how good it made me look.

Are my talents and gifts something I can claim for myself?

There is some part of my brain that tells me I deserve some credit, because I used my own talents and abilities to achieve this result. I am a gifted public speaker (I say to myself), and that is why I spoke well. If I really do have some gift, then it is futile to try and convince myself that I don't, in order to avoid pride. Such mental gymnastics are not a sign of spiritual maturity. The right thing to do is to remind myself where any natural ability, or spiritual gift came from. I contributed no more to my ability to reason logically, than I did to the fact that I am over six feet tall and have blue-grey eyes! I might say those were things I inherited from my parents, or going deeper into the cause, I would say that was how God chose to make me. These physical and mental characteristics are things that God determined. Spiritual gifts are even more obviously things that come directly from God. To claim any credit for such abilities, or the outcomes they produce, is therefore foolish.

When we feel that we are not capable of a task, we are much more likely to go straight to the Lord in prayer for the strength to do it. It is when we instinctively feel that "we have got this", that we will plough ahead by ourselves, forgetting we are dependent on Christ, and then fall flat on our face, and wonder what went wrong! So we find, that it is in our areas of gift and ability that we must be most careful to remember the phrase "Not I".

Doesn't this all lead to laziness and irresponsibility?

It's a reasonable question on the face of it. If I can do nothing, and everything is by the grace of God, then I will simply throw my hands up, stop trying, and let God get on with it! Evidently, this was not the effect produced in the Apostle Paul! Paul had lots of natural and spiritual gifts and he was determined to use them all to the maximum level possible,

but always in service for the Lord, and always remembering that the work and the glory were not Paul's. One clue to how Paul achieved this is what we might call his collegiate approach to Christian work. What I mean, is the way that Paul so often talks about other believers as fellow-labourers or fellow-soldiers. Paul takes this one step further when he is describing the relationship between himself and Apollos in 1 Corinthians 3:5-8 *"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers."* Paul never seems to have seen himself as working alone.

There was always a Timothy or an Epaphroditus, as a fellow-labourer. Even when nobody stood with him (2 Timothy 4:16-17), the Lord was still there. Paul was a fellow worker with God, even when no one else was at hand.

So, Paul worked **with** God, rather than stepping out of the way and letting God get on with things, and that is how we too can rely on the Lord's strength without any temptation to idleness on our part.

How can I be promised rewards for works that are not my own?

Did you notice that little clause, *"Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour"*, in the verse I read from 1 Corinthians 3:8 a moment ago? We will have to consider how that fits into our topic, and whether this contradicts all we have been saying so far about "Not I"! In fact, it is a very important truth, that is well worth underlining, that whenever we expound a particular verse, or an individual biblical teaching, we must always remember that it sits in the context of the entire Word of God, and the complete Christian life. The Christian life is a bit like a fruit salad! It is made up of a range of elements, that must be there in the right proportions. Imagine yourself making a fruit salad, and somebody comes along who loves bananas and tries to convince you that these are the only fruit that really matter, and you should leave everything else out. Then another person comes along who can't stand bananas, and insists that including any at all will spoil the whole thing. You patiently explain to both that it is a fruit salad you are making, not a banana salad, or a banana-free salad, and that you will have to include **all** of the ingredients in their proper proportions, or the whole thing will be spoiled! That's how it is with Christian living and Christian Bible exposition. We are not entitled to leave out the bits we do not particularly like, or to overemphasise the elements that we find especially attractive.

How then do we fit together "Not I" and *"Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour"*? Part of the answer is the extraordinary generosity of God. It is just in keeping with the wonderful grace of God, to offer His servants reward for what He instructs them to do, and He provides all the strength for them to accomplish. At one level, the reward is utterly undeserved. At another level, it is a logical extension of the concept of being God's fellow workers that we have just been considering. It is, paradoxically, when we rely fully on the Lord's strength to complete what He gives us to do, and engage with Him as fellow workers, that He can regard them as our labours, and worthy of reward.

How does all this work out in my own real-world experience?

Finally, we must consider how we can put this into practice in our everyday lives. We don't need to spend every waking hour reminding ourselves of our own deep unworthiness and helplessness. That would quickly turn into an unhealthy self-obsession, and be a denial of Christ's work in us. But we do ask ourselves where our motivation and energy comes from for any particular task. We must also avoid that false distinction between "Christian work" and "Everyday work" that we so easily fall into. We do not seek the Lord's strength only for a limited number of especially Christian activities! Our whole lives are meant to be lived for our Saviour, and that means we must look to Him for strength and guidance in everything that we do.

Lord Jesus, we find it hard to remember, in our busy lives, that we are to be always honouring and pleasing You. We realise, logically, that we have no hope of doing this in our own strength. Grant us the insight to feel this need of You, every day, and the wisdom to have this need drive us toward You in prayer. Amen.

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